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NATO Defence Planning between Wales and Warsaw

Politico-military Challenges of a Credible Assurance against Russia

Rainer L. Glatz and Martin Zapfe

The far-reaching measures agreed by NATO at the Alliance's 2014 Summit in Wales substantially increase operational readiness but fall short in guaranteeing the security of all member states against Russia. The Alliance therefore faces difficult discussions before the next Summit in Warsaw in July 2016. Member states will have to improve capabilities and the operational readiness of their armed forces, which will come at a cost. Indefinitely avoiding the question of the role of nuclear weapons in defensive planning will not be possible. And finally, a credible assurance for the exposed Baltic States may not be feasible in the framework of the NATO-Russia Founding Act. As a transitory step, compromises can be reached, perhaps in the form of establishing an extensive infrastructure for a substantial pre-positioning of materiel. In the absence of a fundamental improvement of NATO's relationship with Russia, however, further measures will likely become necessary.

Through the annexation of Crimea, constituting a clear contravention of international law, and its continuing support of separatists in Eastern Ukraine, Russia has threatened the foundations of the current peaceful European order. Moscow's actions clearly violate the principles of the CSCE Final Act of 1975, which were further reaffirmed with the 1990 Charter of Paris – above all the principle of the inviolability of borders. NATO reacted to this new situation with its resolutions at the Summit in Wales in September 2014 and at the defence ministerial in June 2015. All these decisions have been conspicuously directed against an appar-

ently “revanchist” Russia and are intended to signal the Alliance's determination.

Since the Wales Summit, voices have gained prominence calling for an Allied policy to be based on the often cited dualism of the so-called Harmel Report of 1967 – deterrence through military strength and détente through political dialogue. Long-term, the current radio silence between the Alliance and Russia is without question damaging to all participants. Should NATO nations wish to follow the logic of the Harmel Report, however, such a policy would have to be based on a thorough evaluation of the current politico-military situation.

Complex Threat Scenarios

The Ukraine crisis has developed into a basic and fundamental crisis of confidence between the West and Russia. Above all, the annexation of Crimea has led many NATO and EU member states to conclude that in adopting methods of non-linear or “hybrid” warfare, Russia could attempt to destabilise not only Ukraine, but could also attempt to drive a wedge between the NATO members, stoking insecurity and undermining Alliance guarantees. Ultimately, such methods risk permanently and dangerously blurring the line between peace and war.

Under the label of “hybrid” threats, NATO’s defence planning is focusing on two well-known scenarios with fresh urgency. **First**, the Alliance fears that, by avoiding open aggression and thereby remaining below the threshold for Allied intervention, Russia could attempt to destabilise NATO member states, influence their internal political processes and thus, ultimately, render NATO’s security guarantee irrelevant. **Second**, concern has grown that Russia could be tempted to occupy exposed parts of the Alliance’s territory in a surprise attack and thus present NATO with a fait accompli before it can react. For three reasons, both scenarios have relevance primarily for the Baltic States: first, it is only here that former Soviet Union territories and that of present day NATO members overlap; second, particularly in Estonia and Latvia, there is considerable anxiety about internal instability given the large Russian-speaking population and, third, the Baltic is exposed geographically on the Alliance’s flank.

The Wales Decisions

Against this background, the political logic of the measures agreed upon in Wales becomes clear. The member states reached agreement on the establishment of a so-called “Spearhead Force” (Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, VJTF), the adaptation and expansion of its Multinational Corps Northeast in Szczecin (Poland), as well as the further development of the NATO

Response Force (NRF) into the so-called Enhanced NRF. The “NATO Readiness Action Plan” (RAP) is based on the dualism of “assurance measures”, which emphasise the solidarity of the Alliance, and “adaptation measures” focussing on the reform of NATO. Finally, the heads of state and government of NATO member states pledged a future increase of their defence budgets and investment quotas.

While the assurance measures are intended to underline Allied solidarity with the exposed eastern member states and the indivisibility of security on NATO’s territory, the adaptation measures have far greater long-term significance, as they aim at adapting the military command and control capabilities of NATO and increasing its rapid reaction capabilities.

Assurance measures

In the context of assurance measures public attention focussed initially on the expansion and intensification of military exercises in eastern member states, as well as the essentially symbolic, time-limited deployment of military units. Allied AWACS aircraft are conducting an increased number of surveillance flights over NATO’s eastern territory, and naval units are temporarily showing presence in the Baltic and Black Sea. Another part of the package of measures has been to increase the number of aircraft conducting air policing over the Baltic States. However, in September 2015, the Alliance once again reduced the number of these fighter jets.

In addition to those multilateral measures, NATO individual member states are free to go beyond the Alliance’s steps to demonstrate their even greater determination. Accordingly, the USA has decided on steps which go beyond NATO’s commitment and which are components of the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI) announced by President Barack Obama in June 2014. The resources provided for the ERI have enabled the USA both to maintain a continual rotational unit presence, main-

ly in Poland and the Baltic States, and to increase the number of bilateral exercises. A prominent example is the “Dragoon Ride” of March 2015 that aroused much attention in the media. During this exercise, units of a US cavalry regiment conducted a long road march through eastern member states with armoured combat vehicles. Furthermore, US fighter aircraft were deployed to the region on a rotational basis. In parallel, and in response to an increase in flights by Russian bombers, the US Air Force conducted a small number of strategic bomber flights from bases in Great Britain.

As the ERI was ultimately aimed at exploring the possibilities for the forward stationing of equipment, it did not come as a surprise that, during his European trip in June 2015, US Secretary of Defence Ashton Carter announced the pre-positioning of approximately 250 armoured vehicles in Central and Eastern Europe. For the first time, some of this military equipment will be stationed in the territories of the “new” NATO nations: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Bulgaria, with other elements in Germany as well. In total, this materiel of the so-called European Activity Set (EAS) will serve to equip a Heavy Brigade Combat Team (HBCT) of up to 5,000 soldiers, both for exercises in the context of the rotating presence and for deployments in the region.

Adaptation measures

The less visible yet far more significant part of the Wales decisions is directed at the reorganization of NATO structures and instruments. A key aim of NATO’s Readiness Action Plan is to considerably improve the rapid reaction capability of the NRF. Based on a decision at the NATO defence ministerial in June 2015, its size is to be increased from 19,000 soldiers to 40,000. In addition, the VJTF is being set up as a joint and combined “Spearhead Force” of the highest readiness, with a strength of approximately 5,000 soldiers. The setting up of an interim VJTF as a transitional step, intended to serve as a

partial trial of the concept, was successfully concluded under the command of 1 (German/Netherlands) Corps. The VJTF is to be deployable within a few days after notification to react rapidly to security challenges and thus raise the deterrent effect of NATO’s force posture. In order to achieve this, the Readiness Action Plan also includes the establishment, already underway, of eight permanent, multinational reception bases (NATO Force Integration Units) in the Baltic States, as well as in Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary and Slovakia. Beyond permanently increasing the staff of the German-Danish-Polish multinational corps headquartered in Szczecin (Poland), NATO is continually striving to show presence in the East. For this, NATO is operating with the formula of “persistent presence”, implying a continual presence of NATO units for joint and combined exercises and training, but on a rotational basis, and not as integral combat units.

On the whole, the NATO measures described above, combined with those of individual member states, refrain from an open break with the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997 and shy away from a “permanent stationing of substantial combat forces”. While this reflects the primacy of political concerns and is a legitimate restriction, this basic decision leads to considerable challenges with regard to the implementation of the Wales decisions at a military level.

Implementing the Wales Decisions

Since 2014, NATO has been steadily implementing the decisions taken in Wales. Not least because of their visibility, the public focus rests largely on the increased number and scope of exercises. In 2014, NATO conducted 162 exercises, double the number originally planned. Added to these were another 40 exercises conducted at national levels. For 2015, around 270 exercises had been planned, of which about a half were intended to reassure the eastern European allies.

Far more important, however, have been NATO's efforts to adapt its structures and planning in order to increase operational readiness. Militarily, the Alliance is concentrating on setting up the "Spearhead Force" agreed upon in Wales. Here, considerable challenges are becoming increasingly visible, mostly due to the fact that a continuous forward stationing of NATO combat forces has thus far been avoided.

Ultimately, the VJTF's core function is that of a "mobile tripwire" on the Alliance's borders. The "Spearhead Force" derives its significance from its character as a rapidly deployable guarantee of Alliance solidarity, which should make it difficult for Moscow to attack an individual eastern member state without likewise striking other allies. NATO therefore has ambitious plans for the advance units of the VJTF. They are to be ready to move within two to five days after being alerted. The main follow-on forces are to be ready for deployment within five to seven days. In the absence of forward-stationed combat units, the core function as a "mobile tripwire" fundamentally requires a *rapid* and *assured* deployment of the VJTF.

With regard to *rapid* deployability, political and logistical hurdles are appearing. Politically, NATO states would first have to consent to an activation of the VJTF, which is anything but certain. Under these circumstances, the decision to carefully empower the NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) in this process is an important step. However, improving the Alliance's capabilities in selected areas still seems to be necessary, particularly concerning intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), situational awareness and early warning capabilities.

Yet even after a potential decision by the NATO Council on a deployment of the VJTF and early activation by the SACEUR, the Alliance would quickly meet logistical hurdles. It would struggle to field the necessary strategic transport aircraft vital to any such deployment. Fundamentally, NATO would be dependent on US support and

capabilities. In this matter, the commander of NATO's Allied Joint Force Command Brunssum, General Hans-Lothar Domröse, spoke of a considerable dependency on American air transport. As Domröse put it in a public lecture, the deployment of the VJTF alone and by air would require 450 flights by C-17 heavy strategic transport aircraft. As for overland transport, exercises have shown that the infrastructural, regulatory and planning prerequisites for strategic troop movements, often taken for granted during the Cold War, are practically non-existent.

These logistical hurdles will only grow during those years when a southern European NATO partner will be in command of the VJTF, as distances will increase accordingly. Thus far, scepticism vis-à-vis NATO's ambitious plans seems entirely appropriate: it was the current chairman of the NATO Military Committee, Czech General Petr Pavel, who was quoted in his country's media as saying that Russia was capable of occupying the Baltic States within two days, whilst the NATO states would be in no position to react to the situation.

Just as significant – and so far not sufficiently discussed in public – is the question as to whether deployability would also be *assured*. If the Russian military wanted to prevent a NATO deployment to threatened regions at its flanks, would NATO would be in a position to deploy the VJTF nonetheless? This applies in particular to the Baltic. According to the US Army Europe, modern anti-ship missiles SSC-5 and SA-21 air defence systems stationed in the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad would enable Russia to effectively cover the Baltic Sea and reach well into Polish air space. It must therefore be assumed that Russia would indeed be capable of effectively blocking the air and sea routes into the Baltic states if it so wished. Whether NATO would be capable and willing to force a deployment of the VJTF against a Russian strategy of anti-access/area denial (A2/AD), is more than questionable, especially as further escalation would seem unavoidable in this case.

Of course, whether Russia itself would opt for such an escalation, with attendant repercussions at the strategic level, likewise remains an open question.

These considerations with regard to the VJTF at the same time highlight the limits on the potential use of the whole NRF, supposed to be a sufficiently robust corps-strength force of up to 40,000 soldiers. Whereas the VJTF would be primarily effective through its symbolic “tripwire” function, for the NRF, as NATO’s “second wave” in case of conflict, real-world combat effectiveness would be of utmost importance. Here too, NATO is faced with a major challenge. In the last decades, the level of the corps, once the backbone of NATO’s military planning, has either become operationally irrelevant or even entirely disbanded. Just increasing the staff of a corps headquarters by itself does not automatically lead to higher operational readiness of the entire corps. To reach that aim, the Alliance has to answer important questions, inter alia about the assigned combat divisions and brigades, the permanent corps troops (that is, integral support units directly attached to the corps headquarters) as well as the peacetime deployment and exercises of its subordinate units. Additionally, in the medium term, even an NRF in the strength of a corps – with doubtful operational readiness – might not suffice. According to US sources, Russian snap exercises close to its border involved up to 150,000 soldiers. Naturally, these figures are to be regarded with caution. Credible reports on the efforts of the Russian army to sustain even comparatively small combat task forces in Ukraine put Russian capabilities into context. However, it cannot be excluded that NATO may have to considerably adjust its force posture over the medium term.

Another level of complexity is added through the decision to establish the VJTF on the basis of annually rotating national units. This composition of the VJTF will effectively force NATO to organise an annual rotation of different units from various NATO nations for identical operational

areas, including, most critically, the pre-positioning of necessarily differing equipment and materiel. This will be difficult to sustain in the long term. Ultimately, the plan to have member states supplying troops to the VJTF and the NRF on an annual and rotational basis, combined with the costly pre-positioning of materiel in situ, is highly problematic.

More than one year after Wales, and despite tremendous efforts, it is becoming clear that the compromises which underlie the institutional reforms of the Alliance – the rejection of the forward defence strategy, the annual rotation of the troop-contributing nations, the renunciation of units permanently subordinate to the multinational corps – may well lead to considerable difficulties in the implementation. Taken together, these measures cannot sufficiently contribute to a credible deterrence toward Moscow and a reassurance of the eastern member states in both threat scenarios described above – subversion and *coup de main*.

Before Warsaw – Three Central Questions

Thus, to counter the Russian challenge, NATO is facing three central decisions in the run-up to the Warsaw Summit. **First**, it will have to determine whether the deterioration in relations with Russia will continue for a sustained period – and whether, if the answer is yes, a “deterrence from a distance” through the current configurations of the VJTF and the NRF will be sufficient. **Second**, it will have to touch the sensitive issue of the nuclear dimension, which, so as not to disturb efforts towards a détente with Russia has been almost completely neglected (at least publicly). **Third**, facing at best stagnating national defence budgets and an ongoing lack of military capabilities, the member states will have to focus on the operational readiness of their respective armed forces. All these topics would severely tax the consensus of Wales and are likely to strain NATO solidarity.

First of all, it is already evident today that the Alliance will be confronted with renewed and unequivocal demands on the part of the Polish hosts and the Baltic States to provide credible and tangible tokens of Allied solidarity. Just as the Federal Republic of Germany insisted on the permanent presence of Allied combat forces on its soil, today these states want to see the security guarantee of Article 5 of the NATO Treaty materialised in the form of permanently stationed NATO units.

Thus, the question may well arise as to how the concept of a “forward defence” could be designed, should the Alliance adopt such a strategy, in a way that the desired goal of deterrence could be achieved with minimal risk of escalation. Any effective multinational presence would in essence mirror the logic of the Allied presence in Germany during the Cold War – that is, the tiered presence of German and allied corps – as a guarantee for allied solidarity and assurance against a surprise attack on one single ally. Of course, such a concept is not transferable to the Alliance’s entire eastern border. However, with regard to the Baltic, a permanent presence of multinational combat units is indeed possible. These forces would have to possess sufficient combat effectiveness to delay the opposing forces, in the unlikely event of an attack, until allied reinforcements arrive, while being organically multinational in order to ensure an Allied reaction.

In the long term, the desired multinationality and the required combat effectiveness will only be achieved in combination if the principle of national rotation is given up, and if concrete multinational areas of operations for the respective units are designated. This, combined with the non-assured Allied capability to deploy troops in time and against resistance, could also mean that the NRF should be structured and deployed in a way that would enable them to credibly reinforce the permanently present forces, thereby critically contributing to their deterrence value.

Even if, in the long term, a credible deterrence seems not feasible on the basis of the NATO-Russia Founding Act, NATO has every incentive to strive for a “minimally invasive” break with the Founding Act, in order to signal that it harbours no offensive intentions against Russia whatsoever. Despite considerable difficulties, this could prove possible. Elements of such an agreed “non-offensive operational defence” (*“strukturelle operative Nichtangriffsfähigkeit”*) could be keeping mechanised forces to a minimum, maintaining a logistical base insufficient for offensive operations or designing exercise scenarios of an obviously defensive nature. In addition, NATO should consider how tried and tested arms control mechanisms, in particular with regard to confidence-building measures, could be revitalised in the context of the OSCE, in order to reduce the risk of dangerous surprises – for example, through the presence of Russian observers. Similar concepts have already been discussed intensively during the Cold War. In the long term, these and comparable measures could be the basis for a realistic linking of détente and deterrence, even under the circumstances of a forward defence strategy.

Should the Warsaw Summit fail to agree on a permanent presence in the Baltic, a transitional compromise could be found in establishing an adequate infrastructure for the substantial pre-positioning of materiel. In principle, this could be a feasible option, as it would significantly reduce the logistical challenges of rapid deployment and consequently improve NATO’s rapid reaction capability. Whether this concept of pre-positioned materiel without an accompanying and permanent presence of multinational combat units can ultimately develop sufficiently effective deterrence and reassurance, however, remains to be seen. In the short term, such a compromise thus seems feasible. Without a fundamental détente in relations with Moscow, however, it would be difficult to sustain in the long run.

Whatever the agreement in Warsaw, no military planning for the Baltic can per-

manently ignore the essential interaction of conventional and nuclear planning. Thus far, NATO member states have avoided touching the sensitive issue openly. Despite the current uncertainty about the actual status of Russian nuclear doctrine, Russian nuclear weapons seem to be potentially relevant to the Alliance's own planning on two levels: on the one level as an abstract background threat and symbols of state power, against which Russia could politically influence NATO member states; on the other, and more relevant, as a deterrent against conventional follow-up operations by NATO after a *coup de main* against the Baltic. Beyond those two scenarios, Russia's nuclear arsenal appears to be primarily of defensive value for Moscow, compensating for a continuing position of qualitative inferiority vis-à-vis NATO.

Thus, a pure focus on conventional reassurance would neglect the critical interdependence of conventional and nuclear planning. However, for two understandable reasons, Alliance does not have any interest in a public debate of this topic: first, within the Alliance there are diverging positions on the relevance and doctrinal role of nuclear weapons. And, second, at a certain point, these discussions could even question the INF Treaty of 1987 on the stationing of intermediate range nuclear ballistic and cruise missiles in Europe – and thereby touch a cornerstone of nuclear stability in Europe. Thus NATO's caution is well founded. It does not want to put the political consensus from Wales at risk and at the same time disrupt efforts of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. However, below the highest political levels, an intense debate seems to be getting track and could come to the surface before Warsaw.

Ultimately, increased operational readiness on NATO's part is only a function of the operational readiness of its national armed forces – and this leads to questions extending far beyond the NRF and VJTF. NATO therefore faces a renewed debate as to whether, after decades of continual reduction of the size of national armies –

and, specifically, of the US Army in Europe – often resulting in a loss of capabilities, a reversal of the trend is needed. The cooperation framework of “Smart Defence”, agreed in 2012 at the NATO Summit in Chicago and shaped by the financial crisis, and comparable initiatives, will not suffice to compensate for this qualitative loss.

In the end, NATO's security guarantee will neither be credible nor sustainable without a qualitative improvement of its component national armed forces. Respective efforts should focus primarily on improvements within the existing structures. Decisions in the German Federal Defence Ministry to increase the number of main battle tanks, and to work towards equipping army divisions at 100 percent of the authorized strength point in the right direction. However, even if qualitative improvement is quite rightly at the forefront, certain parts of the armed forces might also see a quantitative increase as well.

This will not be without cost. In Wales, the heads of state and government made a non-binding pledge to halt the reduction in defence budgets and to spend at least two percent of the respective gross domestic product on defence by the end of the next decade. Whether this target will be achieved is doubtful. However, should the member states refrain from substantial steps, increasing their military capabilities and, ultimately, finding a credible deterrent would barely be achievable. Furthermore, European NATO members would also be liable to face another “burden sharing” debate with the USA. And without the latter's military capabilities, in particular without its critical force enablers, NATO could not hope to achieve the level of operational readiness necessary in any scenario.

A view to the South

In principle, a dialogue with the Russian government on the basis of détente and deterrence seems possible and sensible. Nevertheless, in order to ensure that the “deterrence” aspect of this equation is

credible, important questions need to be answered, the responses to which appear to lie beyond the Warsaw consensus. Not all these questions will be answered in Warsaw; but the Alliance will not escape any of them in the long term unless relations with Russia fundamentally improve.

Although this analysis has restricted itself to measures vis-à-vis Moscow, the implications of basic operational readiness of NATO's armed forces go beyond the challenge from the East, particularly with a view to the Alliance's troubled southern flank in the Middle East and North Africa. Should the political leadership of NATO's member states, in the event of further destabilisation on NATO's periphery, decide on a comprehensive and sustained military intervention in this region, this would probably not be possible without a sustained increase in military operational readiness. Thus, the Warsaw Summit could be an important milestone.

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